

Testimony of Peg Portwine, Mother of Brian Portwine

I am here before you to tell the testimony of my son Spc. Brian Portwine. Brian was an infantryman and served in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2006-2008 and in Operation Enduring Freedom in 2010.

During his first tour he was deployed to Baghdad and his job was to patrol Haifa street, which was a very dangerous area. This was before the surge of troops. During this tour, Brian lost 8 brothers.

While in Iraq in 2006 Brian was in a Bradley tank that was struck by a RPG. The tank was immediately engulfed in flames and the driver was knocked unconscious. Due to the driver being able to hydraulically let down the ramp the 5 soldiers had to scramble thru the fire to manually lower the ramp and miraculously they were able to get out, all with injuries. Brian suffered a blast concussion and had lacerations to his face and legs from shrapnel. This was Brian's first episode of Traumatic Brain Injury.

During another mission Brian and his 1st Sgt were on patrol in a Humvee and had switched seats so Brian was now in the passenger seat. Twenty minutes later an IED hit the Humvee and his 1st Sgt was killed and Brian was thrown from the Humvee and injured his back. Besides these 2 incidents Brian was involved in 5 other IEDs during his 15 month deployment.

After coming home after his 1st deployment Brian had trouble with short term memory. When his friends were going somewhere he would often say "where are we going again, you know I have scrambled brains" To help cope with this he would post everything he had to do on his calendar or computer.

In 2010 Brian was recalled to the Army and deploying from Fort Shelby, Miss. During this deployment Brian did not email or call home or to his friends. Little did we know how he was struggling with PTSD and TBI. He had panic attacks being on the same roads he had traveled on the 1st tour where IEDs went off often. He had nightmares 3 x a week and would wake up his unit and someone would have to wake him up. He suffered with anxiety, depression, insomnia, poor concentration, and hypervigilance. But he was never sent home.

After returning from his 2nd deployment in Dec. 2010 to Daytona Beach he did not want to return to school. We did not know he had applied for disability due to his PTSD/TBI. He knew the stigma of saying you had PTSD so he kept it to himself.

During outprocessing from Fort Shelby in 2010 Brian was diagnosed with PTSD, TBI, depression, and anxiety. During one assessment the counselor stated "Pt cannot remember questions asked". He had guilt, anxiety, hypervigilance, poor concentration, rage and anger but the VA/DOD told him to follow-up with the local VA outpatient.

I am horrified by this. All his symptoms are classic symptoms of PTSD and TBI. He should have been sent to the National Intrepid Center for excellence at Fort Hood, TX where they have a 3-4 week program for those with TBI and PTSD.

Brian deteriorated quickly from Dec, 2010 to May 2011. He could not stand how he acted but had no coping methods or treatment. It took a toll on his relationships with friends.

If the DOD and VA assessed Brian at high risk for suicide it is their duty to treat him. But he got nothing.

Brian's unit has lost 3 others to suicide, one just June 21st, 2014. It is a very slippery slope from PTSD and TBI and the VA should realize this.

Our soldiers never hesitated in their missions to protect, serve, and sacrifice for our country.

Now it is time for the VA to prove their commitment to our soldiers.

I never knew of Brian's PTSD and TBI or high suicide risk. I would think a life threatening event like this should be told to the emergency contact person.

The VA needs to work the service organizations and include the families in the plan of care.

I beg this Committee to pass act 2182, the Suicide Prevention for Americans Act

As a mother I have lost my only miracle child to suicide. It is devastating!

I would like to close by saying a quote from Rose Kennedy. It says, "time heals all wounds."

I disagree. The wounds remain. In time the mind to protect its sanity covers them with scar tissue and the pain lessens. But it is never gone. Thank you.